

Filmmakers as Memory Keepers

In the study of world's fairs and expositions, it has become increasingly important to understand these events from the perspectives of the fairgoers themselves. Until recently, the written history of world's fairs has largely neglected the individual experience of the fairgoer. Historian James Gilbert, in his recent book, *Whose Fair? Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition*, seeks to credit the memory and experience of world's fair visitors as valuable and insightful contributions in the history of such expositions. Gilbert suggests that "...historians as well as memory-keepers sometimes neglect the experience of certain types of historical actors, particularly those who constitute the audience...."<sup>1</sup> In this process, the experiences of the "audience" (fairgoers) becomes insignificant and hindered by "...grander formulas of explanation derived from our concentration on the record of elite actors and opinion."<sup>2</sup> Gilbert suggests that the fairgoers reveal how these events were understood from societal perspectives and points out these accounts are necessary in the study of world's fairs and "...as vital sources of meaning"<sup>3</sup> in historical interpretation.

With the invention of film, gaining perspective and meaning from individual fairgoers has become increasingly significant in the understanding of visual interpretation at world's fairs and expositions. Many visitors to the New York World's Fair 1939/1940 (NYWF) chose to take part in capturing the spectacles of the fair by means of producing amateur films. In viewing some of the film footage from the NYWF, one is able to gain insight into what fairgoers at this time were interested in and what they wanted to see at the fair. After all, world's fairs and expositions

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<sup>1</sup> James Gilbert, *Whose Fair? Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2009), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert, 12.

were enormous venues and it was not possible for visitors to see everything presented at the fair. Earle Shettleworth, Sr. (1899-1986), visited the NYWF in 1939 and produced a memoir of the fair primarily through film footage that focused on the architecture, sculptures and panoramic views of the fair. From Shettleworth's film documentation of the 1939 NYWF, it can be concluded that although world's fairs attracted many visitors seeking extraordinary entertainment there were still many fairgoers interested in the pure physicality of the fairgrounds and buildings themselves. Of course, each film must be analyzed on an individual level but it is important to realize that for average visitors to such fairs, the architecture was shockingly ahead of its time, especially at the 1939 NYWF, which appeared wildly futuristic to many visitors.

Unlike a photograph, which can often, as James Gilbert notes, "...replace or even invent an experience and a memory,"<sup>4</sup> film footage reinforces a past experience by capturing visual components that a camera lens leaves behind. In viewing the New York World's Fair (NYWF) film footage of Robert Decker, it becomes evident that some visitors to the NYWF chose to film for the purpose of maintaining family memories. In both a long and short shot, Decker captures two members of his family as they pose for a photo, or perhaps for the movie camera itself. If perhaps Decker took a photograph of his family instead of capturing the family moment on film, the experience and memory would be altered and lose certain visual elements captured by the film. This particular NYWF film offers viewers an understanding of who people may have traveled to the fair with and how this may have affected their experience and their memory of the fair.

Film footage, as well as many other primary source documents, is crucial in the study of world's fairs and expositions. The intimate detail it provides of lived experience contributes to

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<sup>4</sup> Gilbert, 105.

an understanding “about how America’s at the time understood their changing world...”<sup>5</sup> In neglecting such accounts, the influences of world’s fairs on society and culture cannot be understood. If world’s fairs became, as Gilbert notes, “...the most extravagant cultural events staged in modern history,”<sup>6</sup> it is significantly important to understand them through those who lived within the social, political and cultural realms that were producing such influential events.

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert, 194.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert, 13.